Patient-Provider Relationship Evolution: Balancing Personal Connections with Technology

The Evolution of the Doctor-Patient Relationship

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, healthcare was steadily shifting toward a personalized experience where consumerism, telemedicine, and a more holistic approach to well-being was transforming what patients expect from their doctors. Then, with the onset of the novel Coronavirus pandemic, the entire healthcare experience was turned on its head. It is quite difficult to be sure what a return to "normal" will look like post-pandemic, but we do know it's likely to drive the healthcare evolution at an even faster pace.

Greater Patient Role in the New Healthcare Dynamic

The once one-sided doctor-patient relationship was directed by the physician; however, today, patients take a greater role. The result is more of a partnership instead of a one-way street.

Some of this is due to a shift in culture. It's also generational, with younger patients more comfortable asking questions about their diagnosis, prognosis, testing, and treatments. And approximately one-third of U.S. employees are covered under a high deductible health plan, putting more emphasis on healthcare consumerism than in the past.

But the largest factor shaping the new dynamic is more accessible online healthcare information. Eight in 10 Americans use the internet to look up medical information at least once a year. Contrary to what you might expect, many practitioners are welcoming this new age of information in healthcare.

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8,000%

spike in claims for telemedicine in April 2020 vs 2019

"I am astounded by the number of patients who express guilt and sheepish admissions that they have researched their symptoms online. I regularly encourage my patients to explore and understand their own health. I believe the past role of the physician as sole purveyor of knowledge is outmoded. Patients hold more information in the palms of their hands than I could ever hope to encapsulate in years of study."

- Aaron George, DO.

"Other providers see their role as a kind of health "coach" when it comes to patient engagement", says Lygeia Ricciardi, EdM, Chief Transformation Officer at Carium, "The provider should become the patient's navigator through the mass amount of conflicting and questionable information available. To help develop this partnership, one thing providers can do is educate patients on where to find credible health information."

This exchange of ideas between physician and patient drives patient engagement, and ultimately, better health outcomes.

The Virtual Doctor Will See You Now

It's no secret that Coronavirus-related social distancing has created an explosion in virtual healthcare. One survey reported an 8,000% spike in claims for telemedicine measured in April 2020, compared to the previous year. And it's been a game-changer for patients in rural and hard-to-reach areas where access to healthcare can be limited.

While older adults were often reluctant to participate in telehealth programs in the past, COVID-19 has made this a more attractive option for them. Forty-five percent of patients 50 and older say they are more willing to use telehealth as a result of the virus, according to a University of Michigan study of older patients. Once the threat of Coronavirus ebbs, 83% of patients plan to still use telehealth—so it appears that virtual care is here to stay. Of course the continued coverage by Medicare and insurance carriers will influence the prevalence of telemedicine in the future.

What is telemedicine/telehealth?

The Kaiser Family Foundation defines it as follows:

Patients using a device:	To communicate with their provider via:	When the patient is at:
• Smartphone • Computer • Tablet • Monitoring device	• Videoconferencing • Remote patient monitoring • Phone • Secure messaging	• Home or other location of choice • Clinic • Office • Hospital

Calling a doctor
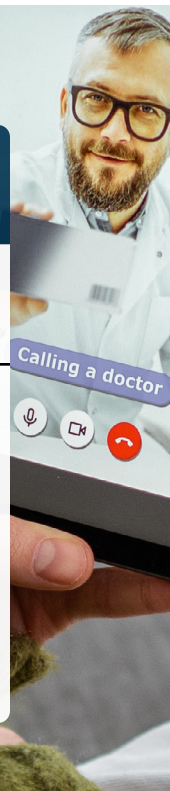
What patients say about telehealth

65% think it's more convenient than office visits

63% like the reduced exposure to potentially sick patients

44% think it's easier to make telehealth appointments

38% like the streamlined communication and follow-ups

So How Do Providers Feel About Telehealth?

The number of doctors who are using telehealth rose to 80% in 2020. In a study published by the American Medical Association (AMA), nearly 90% of physicians—especially primary care doctors—have a positive opinion of telehealth and see the advantages of using it. But it's not as easy as it seems. Most, but not all, major medical insurance carriers cover telemedicine care. Some states have parity rules that require telemedicine to be reimbursed by private insurance at the same rate as in-person visits. However, the level of benefits paid may depend on the way care is delivered, and there is a lot of confusion about what insurance companies will cover.

What about Medicare and Medicaid? Beginning in March 2020, Medicare reimburses telemedicine care, including telephone calls, but the payment process can be complex. Practices must use specific CPT and HCPCS codes that are covered under telemedicine services. Medicaid also covers telemedicine according to guidelines established by the individual states.

The bottom line? Telehealth was around before COVID-19 and will likely continue to be an alternative to in-person visits for patients and practices for the foreseeable future. Those practices who don't offer virtual care may find themselves at a disadvantage in recruiting patients going forward.

80%
of providers are using tools for virtual office visits in 2020

90%
of physicians have a positive view of telehealth and see advantages of using it

Patients Want Greater Cost Transparency

Today's healthcare consumers have more financial skin in the game when it comes to their care. High deductible health plans, growing unemployment, lack of insurance, and practices not accepting insurance create greater out-of-pocket expenses for patients. With medical care becoming a big ticket item in the average household budget, patients are paying more attention to cost when making decisions about their care. A 2019 report from TransUnion Healthcare found 62% of patients say that knowing their share of the cost influences their decision about receiving care. The same research found that 49% said that having clear information about expected costs impacts their decision to use a healthcare provider. While more patients are asking about costs, many are waiting for their provider to start the conversation, highlighting just how uncomfortable and unfamiliar people are with the idea of healthcare price shopping.

So how do patients determine the cost of care?

Unfortunately, prices for healthcare are not as transparent as the cost of nearly any other service or product in the marketplace. A few sources exist, such as Healthcare Bluebook, but for the most part, a patient must be their own detective when it comes to ferreting out the cost of a procedure, medication, diagnostic test, or inpatient stay. Physicians can help by being thoughtful about the care they recommend—eliminating duplicate or unnecessary procedures. Electronic health records can also be a source of treatment costs, based on CPT or ICD-10 codes.
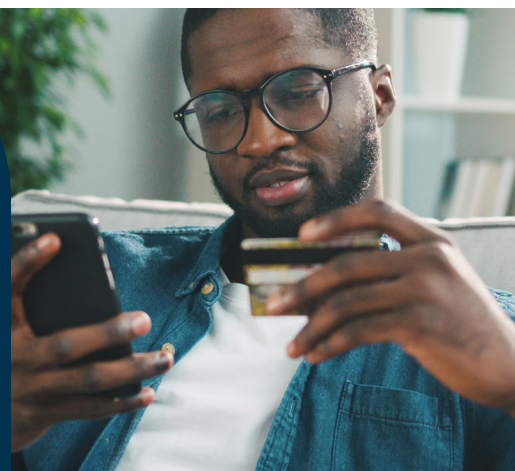
In 2019, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) issued two rules that take steps to increase healthcare price transparency competition

1. The 2020 Outpatient Prospective Payment System (OPPS) & Ambulatory Surgical Center (ASC) Price Transparency Requirements for Hospitals to Make Standard Charges Public Final Rule is scheduled to take effect in 2021. It will call for U.S.hospitals to establish, publish, and update a yearly list of standard charges for items and services.

2. Transparency in Coverage Proposed Rule will require payers to publish cost-sharing information, in-network provider negotiated rates, and out-of-network costs. Once finalized, plans will have one year to implement the legislation. However, some provider groups, such as American Hospital Association, are against the rule because they don't believe it will help patients make "prudent" decisions.

While we wait to see what happens with the legislation, providers can feel sure about two things: 1. Patients want—and deserve—to know more about the cost of care, and 2. Conversations with patients about expenses can be uncomfortable. But cost-benefit conversations offer valuable insights that your patients need to make their best care choices. This is especially important with patients in vulnerable populations.

To minimize exposure, practices should have patients complete intake forms electronically and reduce contact with other patients with carefully spaced appointments and online check-in.

The Disappearing Waiting Room

The Coronavirus pandemic has changed one of the oldest features of ambulatory care: the waiting room. To minimize exposure, practices should have patients complete intake forms electronically and reduce contact with other patients with carefully spaced appointments and online check-in.

The obvious advantage of electronic forms and online check-in is less time in a potentially unsafe environment. But it also helps the provider since he or she has the opportunity to review a patient's forms before they see the patient. Some systems even automatically update a patient's profile as soon as it's submitted by the patient, eliminating administrative delays and gaps in provider knowledge.

Virtual healthcare has also reduced the number of in-person visits and the accompanying need to travel to the doctor's office. Patients minimize their time away from work, the need to find child care, and other personal inconveniences.

As practices adopt more technology to handle administrative tasks, clinicians, front office staff, and patients all benefit. These advancements have gained popularity as a result of the pandemic, but they will likely become a permanent part of the patient experience in the future.

Our View of the Patient Experience

RXNT's clients are healthcare providers and staff, but we recognize that your business depends on your ability to recruit and retain patients. Our software solutions offer features that help you engage and communicate with them. For example, our Electronic Health Records are telehealth-friendly and give you the ability to create customized, interactive patient intake forms that are accessible right from our Patient Portal. We also offer flexible billing options, such as online patient bill payment and sliding fee schedules.